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ABSTRACT

To shed light on reciprocal social networks for adult literacy learners, an ethnographic study sought to understand the dynamics of social networks from a sociocultural perspective, that of the adult basic education learners themselves. Subjects were a diverse population of six adult learners at a suburban adult education center (five working to pass the General Educational Development test and one enrolled in an English-as-a-Second-Language class). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. Results indicated that several factors had both supporting and hindering effects: family, teacher, schooling, and friends. One factor consistently emerged as entirely supportive of literacy growth--the learners themselves. Specific occupational goals emerged as another consistent factor in support of literacy growth. Findings suggest that these six people, by their words and actions, dramatically deny the deficit view of adult literacy learners. (One table of data is included.) (RS)

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The Dynamics of ABE Social Networks

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J. Peck

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Researchers have clearly documented misconceptions of adult learners and misunderstandings of literacy development (Kazemek, 1988). Contrary to the popularly portrayed profile of adult learners as helpless, dependent individuals, Fingeret (1983, 1989) found adult literacy learners were members of reciprocal social networks; she found they maintained interdependent relationships with others, offering their talents in exchange for help with reading and writing. Little is known, however, about the dynamics of such networks. What factors variously support or hinder growth in reading and writing? Do the networks change as literacy grows? In what ways do adult literacy learners take control of their learning?

This ethnographic study sought to understand the dynamics of social networks from a sociocultural perspective, that of the adult learners themselves. This study is grounded in the work of Johnston (1985), who used the case study approach to understand reading disabilities as those who experienced the difficulty knew it. Kazemek (1988) issued a call for adult literacy professionals to develop programs that deny the deficit view of adult learners and build instead upon the strength of their sociocultural networks. Adults sometimes choose nonparticipation because the integrity of their sociocultural networks is not upheld in literacy programs. If participation in literacy programs is predicated on loss of sociocultural identity, adults often choose nonparticipation (Quigley, 1990). Finlay and Harrison (1992) explored alternative measures of success that recognize the learners' role in goal setting and evaluation.

Meeting the Informants

The site of this study was a suburban adult education center. Informants expressed their willingness to share their experiences "if it would somehow help others like me," and help others understand their experience.

The interviews were semi-structured with open ended questions about who or what supported or hindered literacy development, who was involved in the decision to take classes, changes in relationships since beginning classes, and things the learner wished had been different. The interviews were conducted in hallways, the cafeteria, or rooms not occupied by classes. They were audiotaped for transcription purposes only.

The informants represented a diverse population of adult learners; five were working to pass the General Educational Development (GED) test and one was enrolled in an English as Second Language (ESL) class. The GED students included Mike, who was 19 years old and had dropped out of school at age 16; Barb and Kim, sisters who had been out of school almost ten years and had started adult basic education classes three years prior; Ed, who was middle-aged and had been employed until a disability and change in required credentials limited his employability; and Dorothy, who was older middle-aged, could no longer do laundry work because of arthritis and now needed credentials to work in a daycare center. Mary, a younger middle-aged immigrant from Romania, was enrolled in ESL classes. As there were differences there were also commonalities: all were white, of low-middle socioeconomic class.

Listening to Their Stories

Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were combed for patterns and regularities (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This process was facilitated by use of a software program, *The Ethnograph.* Inductive analysis was used to uncover tentative categories which were then refined through the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Factors within the learners' social networks that either supported or hindered literacy growth are shown in Table 1.

Several factors having both supporting and hindering effects appeared frequently in the data. Family, for instance, was a strong supporting factor in the networks of Barb and Kim, Ed, and to a lesser extent, Dorothy; family, they reported, encourage them to take classes and help them with homework. Kim remembered her mother saying, "Read, read. You learn a lot when you read." But for Mike and Mary family factors presented hindrances to their literacy growth; Mike wanted his parents to help him but he said they didn't. Mary reported that relatives here in the States said, 'Don't go to school. You have to get a job to get money."

Another factor reported to have both supporting and hindering effects is the teacher. All six learners spoke about the support they felt from their current adult education teachers. Barb and Kim described their teacher as "...interesting...she shows and tells you...she doesn't rush you, either. If you don't understand it, you know, then she goes slow...She makes you feel comfortable and she lets you know about herself [tells personal stories] and so you feel comfortable." This echoes the learner response to conversational asides documented by McDermott (1982). Ed commented that his teacher showed support by affirming his

ownership of his learning; she asked, "Where do you need your help, Ed?" Dorothy described her teacher's positive attitude as a supporting factor. Mary reported, "The teacher is very serious, very active. So she wants to teach us many things. So we understand when we are in class." Mike contrasted the support he felt from his adult education teacher with his earlier, traditional grade teachers: "They just didn't care. They didn't care what I did, so I just sat there and did nothing."

Schooling also emerged as both a support and hindrance, depending on the qualitative features of the experience. Ed, in particular, compared on the support he felt from the other students in his adult class with experiences he had in traditional schooling: "...and being with people that are at the same level, and we're all adults, you don't get the aggravation like when you were kids in school and you make a mistake and everybody chuckles and, you know, that harassment you get. So, it's a laid-back atmosphere where you can work at it, you know, with the adult." While Mike found his adult education teacher to be more supportive than his traditional teachers, he commented that special classes in his traditional schooling years were supportive because of the individual attention he was given.

Friends were often reported as supportive of literacy growth. Mike said his girlfriend encourages him to do his homework and sometimes helps him with it if she has the time. Other friends ask him, "Still going to class?" When he says he is they say, "That's good." Barb and Kim both felt their friends showed support by asking questions about how it's going. Other times friends were reported to hinder participation in literacy activities. When asked if anyone hindered her progress in reading and writing Kim responded, "Well for me, the only person was sort of my boyfriend. At first, when I told him he like didn't want me

comin' here. He doesn't want me to better myself and do better than him. He's the only one that really put a block on me." Mary reported that lots of people said, "You don't have to go to school because you can learn from work, from the job."

One factor consistently emerged as entirely supportive of literacy growth-- the learners themselves. Without exception, the decision to participate in adult literacy classes was made independently by the learner. Dorothy said, ".I just made up my mind about coming to school..it took me a long time to really make up my mind to do it." When asked if anyone else was involved in making that decision she replied, "For me? No...Totally my own." Similarly, in Barb's words, "...to come here...you have to do it yourself. I'm not doing it for anybody but me. You know, no one pushed me to come here. I decided. It took me time, three years to come back, but I did it on my own." Even though Mary heard from others that she doesn't need to take classes, her answer was, "We work, but we have to go to school because otherwise we don't learn...I mean, if you don't go to school, how can you learn?...This is my second job...No. We have to take these classes..." Ed was tentative about taking the classes at first. He reported that "...the teacher told me the first week, she said, 'Do you want to participate or do you want to watch?' And I said, 'Well, let me watch and see the first night.' And at the end of the evening she said, 'Well, what do you think?' And I said, 'Well, you know, it's interesting and I think I can be a part of it and learn something from it.' So then I became a part of it, you know..." Mike reflected, "I wish I hadn't dropped out of school...so I can get a high school diploma which is better than a GED and have a better job. Now that I'm older, now I kinda realize it."

Specific occupational goals emerged as another consistent factor in support of literacy growth. For Ed and Dorothy, circumstances had changed, making a GED a necessity where before they had been able to work without one. Ed needed to pass a test to be able to drive a truck; Dorothy needed a GED to work in a daycare center. Kim wanted to get a job and maybe go to school for "...you know, something like a counselor." Her sister, Barb, chuckled and said, "I just want to make more money...you know, I want to buy a house. I don't want to have to get married, then buy a house." Mike, too, expressed his desire for a better job. Mary's goal is similar to these, but her path is slightly different. Mary worked as an engineer in Romania and wants to be able to converse better in English to "...go in a high level or something like that, to do some professional work..."

This strong ownership of the decision to participate in literacy classes and their specific occupational goals affirms the independent self of these adult learners. Self-initiated strategies give further evidence of their independence. When asked who helped him become a better reader and writer, Mike replied, "Myself...I'm workin' on things. Workin' on my school work, and workin' on my magazine." Mike pursues an interest in rock music and supports his reading and writing growth by networking through underground music magazines. He trades demo tapes with groups around the country and in the UK. He interviews band members through letters. He has provided for himself a literacy context in which he can grow. When asked if he has noticed changes in his reading and writing since working with the magazine, Mike replied, "Yeah. Bigger interviews. A lot longer...I've asked 'em more questions and I've gotten more in depth with their band and stuff."

Ed self-initiated strategies, too. While working in a warehouse he devised a strategy for filling the orders: "Let's say ah, toilet paper, you want six rolls going to South Bend, Indiana on this order, or boxes of toothpaste and so forth. You'd read it and then you'd go down the line and look it all up...It's a matching deal. It's a hard way to do it...But also I did that matching for years. I, excuse the expression, bull shitted my way through life. But I worked on the truck docks the same way."

Another aspect of independence may be interpreted through the lack of comment about reciprocal activities. When asked if they do things in return for help with reading and writing, the responses were vague at best. Barb and Kim said they did a lot for their family, "Well, if they need something, you know, we'll be there..." None of the learners interviewed in this study specifically described getting help with reading and writing activities in their lives outside the class. Neither did they specifically name activities they did for others in return. The weakness of reciprocity may indicate the strength of independence for these learners.

Adult classes are no small part of these learners' social networks. Besides family and friends, the adult education teachers emerge as a strong supporting factor in literacy growth, whereas traditional literacy education experiences were frequently reported to be a hindrance. The idiosyncracies of experience are clearly shown. In one person's experience family and friends may be a support, but in another's, only a hindrance; and within a single life, factors may change over time or over situations. Interestingly, no exclusively hindering factors emerged from this data.

These six people dramatically deny the deficit view of adult literacy learners by their words and actions. Each of their stories contain chapters of support and hindrance. Though the characters and events vary from life story to life story, the theme is universal: adult learners bring an integrity of self to their literacy activities. Mary expresses it beautifully, "We are proud of us. We can make our decision."

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Table 1

	Family	Teachers prior/now	Schooling prior/now	Friends
Barb & Kim	S	H --> S		H --> S
Ed	S	S	H --> S	S
Dorothy	S	S		
Mike	H	H --> S	S <--> H	S
Mary	H	S		H

S = Support
H = Hindrance